



## **QUARTERLY iRep UPDATE ON KEY ISSUES RELATING TO RELIGION AND STATE IN ISRAEL**

**Volume 2, August 2016**

This religion and state update was prepared by the staff of iRep. It covers the period from April through July 2016. Please click [here](#) to review volume 1 which covers January – April 2016.

### **1. Ritual Baths (Mikveh)**

In February 2016, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that State ritual baths (Mikva'ot) can be used in non-Orthodox conversion processes. The Court ruling came some 10 years after the initial filing. During that time period, there was no movement towards providing an alternate publicly-funded arrangement that would have respected the full range of religious practices while also respecting Orthodox sensitivities.

Following the Court decision, major objections were raised by the Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) parties, and the United Torah Judaism Party introduced a bill to overturn the Court's ruling. This ruling gave women who wish to submerge without an official attendant present access to State-funded ritual baths. Despite attempts to thwart the bill, a deal was brokered, and the bill passed into law on July 25, 2016. The law may ultimately be found to be "illegal", as the Justice Ministry views it to be discriminatory against non-Orthodox streams. Efforts are still underway to find a pragmatic solution that would enable non-Orthodox converts access to publicly-funded ritual baths – and JFNA is working closely with Natan Sharansky in his capacity as Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency, leadership of the streams, and representatives of the Government, to achieve resolution.

Read more:

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/knesset-approves-law-to-bar-non-orthodox-from-ritual-baths/>

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.733270>

<http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial-opinion/opinion/mikvah-bill-center-religious-equality>

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/JPost-Editorial-Promises-promises-460755>

## **2. Conversion**

In July 2016, news broke of a case in which the local Petah Tikva Rabbinical court rejected the conversion of an American woman whose conversion was performed by a prominent mainstream American Orthodox rabbi, Rabbi Haskel Lookstein. Despite the intervention of Chief Rabbi David Lau, who validated Rabbi Looksteins' credentials, the the Supreme Rabbinical Court upheld the decision of the lower Rabbinic court on July 6<sup>th</sup>. The case received significant media attention and spurred outrage amongst modern Orthodox Jews. The local Rabbinic court's decision was condemned by Jewish Agency chairman Nathan Sharansky and Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein.

Read more:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/world/middleeast/israel-rabbinate-jewish-conversion.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/world/middleeast/israel-rabbinate-jewish-conversion.html?_r=0)

<http://www.ipost.com/Israel-News/Looksteins-conversions-are-valid-says-Lau-459606>

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.729184>

[http://forward.com/news/346404/rabbi-haskel-looksteins-long-hot-summer-in-the-spotlight/?utm\\_content=daily Newsletter MainList Title Position-1&utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=New%20Daily%202016-08-01&utm\\_term=The%20Forward%20Today%20Monday-Friday](http://forward.com/news/346404/rabbi-haskel-looksteins-long-hot-summer-in-the-spotlight/?utm_content=daily%20Newsletter%20MainList%20Title%20Position-1&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Daily%202016-08-01&utm_term=The%20Forward%20Today%20Monday-Friday)

## **3. Marriage and Divorce**

In July 2016, grantees of the JFNA initiative iRep (Israel Religious Expressions Platform) launched a major public awareness radio campaign in Israel to focus the public's attention on the issue of freedom of choice in marriage.

Read more:

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.730481>

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4836460,00.html>

<http://www.themedialine.org/more-from-the-media-line/israelis-start-reject-rabbinic-establishment/>

iRep also supported a number of grassroots initiatives promoting freedom of marriage, including a gay marriage ceremony which took places during the Jerusalem Pride Parade.

<http://www.themedialine.org/news/twenty-five-thousand-march-largest-gay-pride-parade-jerusalem/>

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/a-year-after-tragedy-big-colorful-jerusalem-pride-parade-is-a-celebration-of-tolerance/>

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.732693>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-22/two-men-get-married-at-jerusalem's-gay-pride-parade/7651096>

#### **4. The Kotel (Western Wall)**

In January 2016, the Israeli cabinet voted to create an egalitarian prayer space at the Wall. Since the agreement was approved, objections have been raised primarily by Haredi leadership, and implementation has not moved forward.

JFNA continues to be highly engaged in efforts to advance implementation of this agreement.

As part of JFNA's ongoing efforts to maintain focus on the issue and push for implementation of the agreement, missions and groups have been gathering regularly for mixed prayer services at the traditional Kotel Plaza.

Read more:

<http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=460086>

<http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=460118>

<http://www.pressreader.com/israel/jerusalem-post/20160704/281642484489921>

<http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=459364>

<http://www.haaretz.com/misc/article-print-page/1.725712>

#### **5. Government Policy Related to the Haredi Community**

##### **a. Service in the IDF and Entry into the Workforce**

Historically, ultra-Orthodox ("Haredi") yeshiva students could avoid army service if they studied full time in yeshiva. Currently, there are some 60,000 men who fall into this category. In the previous government, new legislation was introduced that would have seen a far greater percentage of this population drafted into the army (or alternative national service), with financial penalties or criminal sanctions to be imposed on those who avoided the draft. The criminal sanctions were recently removed from the law and a "grace period" for those avoiding service has been granted until 2023.

Read more:

<http://forward.com/news/israel/307624/orthodox-draft-laws/>

In recent years, there has been government and public pressure on Haredi men to join the workforce. The previous government sought to stimulate that process by enacting new regulations that limited stipends for yeshiva students to 5 years. In addition, the Ministry of the Economy established new regulations that would require both Haredi parents to work in order for the family to be eligible for subsidized daycare. The purpose of these policies was to create economic incentives for Haredi men to enter the workforce or pursue academic studies.

Read more:

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/.premium-1.562089>

In the current government, the regulations excluding full subsidies for day care for parents who are not employed was cancelled. In addition, the government passed new regulations to reinstate the income support payments to full-time, long-term yeshiva students.

Read more:

<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/High-Court-demands-state-explain-why-full-time-yeshiva-students-get-child-care-subsidies-442168>

<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Bill-giving-income-support-payments-to-yeshiva-students-approved-for-passage-to-Knesset-430040>

<http://www.jerusalemonline.com/news/politics-and-military/politics/israeli-government-to-pass-aid-bill-for-yeshiva-students-22643>

#### **b. Core Curriculum studies**

The ultra-Orthodox education system in Israel is officially private but is heavily subsidized by the Ministry of Education.

During the past 15 years, various governments have made an effort to engage in a dialogue with ultra-Orthodox leaders in order encourage core curriculum studies alongside traditional religious studies. Most notably, the previous government introduced new regulations to require 10 hours a week of core curriculum subjects in the independent Talmud Torah schools. These new regulations were canceled in July 2016 due to pressure by the United Torah Judaism Party.

In a recent development, several hundred Haredi parents signed a petition demanding that the Education Minister establish alternative ultra-Orthodox schools where their children can be taught the core curriculum.

Read more:

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.734788>

<http://www.ipost.com/Israel-News/An-end-to-core-curriculum-studies-for-Haredi-pupils-460652>

<http://www.ipost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Min-Committee-approves-bill-cancelling-obligatory-core-curriculum-studies-for-haredi-schools-462238>

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.734551>

## **6. Shabbat**

The nature of Shabbat – Saturday – in Israel has been an issue of contention between religious and secular citizens since the founding of the State. The historic “status quo agreement” mandated that only recreational activities would take place on Shabbat, which meant that no commercial activity or public transportation would be permitted. However, over the years, many businesses have opened on Shabbat, providing not only cultural or recreational activities but also commercial activity.

In the past few months, various Knesset members have presented bills that deal with the nature of Shabbat. Four members of Knesset, from religious and secular backgrounds and various parties, presented a joint proposal offering a new compromise by which businesses would be allowed to operate on Shabbat. There are several municipalities trying to establish limited public transportation on Shabbat by taking advantage of loopholes in the legal wording of the issue. In addition, some liberal groups recently petitioned the High Court of Justice, claiming that the lack of public transportation to hospitals, to various Arab cities and towns, and in the periphery, is discriminatory.

Read more:

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.725835>

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.726584>

<http://www.ipost.com/Israel-News/Growing-high-level-public-support-for-public-transport-on-Shabbat-poll-finds-457217>

## **7. Kashrut**

The supervision of restaurants and food to ensure they are kosher is another area of considerable friction, with the law granting the Chief Rabbinate exclusive powers over supervision of kashrut in Israel.

Recently, a group known as “Hashgacha Pratit,” (or Private Supervision), began issuing kashrut certification. The group claims to be “an independent kashrut supervision authority, which was established in response to poor practices in the Rabbinate’s kashrut service.”

In the face of the increasing popularity of alternative kashrut services, the Supreme Court ruled in June 2016 that only the Chief Rabbinate is authorized to grant businesses their kashrut certification. In attempt to honor the ruling, Hashgacha Pratit has since changed the wording of their certificates to remove any language that suggests supervision, or even kashrut.

<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/High-Court-ruling-strengthens-Chief-Rabbinates-monopoly-over-kashrut-456071>

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.725603>

<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Selective-enforcement-of-kashrut-law-by-rabbinate-akin-to-mafia-say-activists-456860>